

First records of Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala* for Benin

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Premières mentions de la Bouscarle caqueteuse *Bradypterus baboecala* pour le Bénin. En décembre 2012, plusieurs Bouscarles caqueteuses *Bradypterus baboecala* ont été observées, photographiées et leur chant enregistré dans la Plaine du Sô (06°30'N 02°23'E) au sud du Bénin. Depuis, l'espèce y est rencontrée régulièrement et a également été contactée plus au nord dans la Basse Vallée de l'Ouémé. Ces observations remplissent une lacune dans la distribution de l'espèce en Afrique occidentale.

On 1 December 2012, JM & SM spent the morning in the Plaine du Sô, in the lower Ouémé Valley, an Important Bird Area and Ramsar Site in south-eastern Benin, and habitat of Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia* (Plomp *et al.* 2012). While driving from Akassato towards Sô-Ava on the Sô River, they heard a distant bird song with which they were unfamiliar. At a second stop, at c.07.30 hrs, they heard two more similar songs emerging from a patch of 2–3 m-tall *Typha australis* reeds c.4 m from the road (c.06°29'44"N 02°23'22"E; Fig. 1). The song, which was sound-recorded (Fig. 2), consisted of an accelerating series of 11–16 chirps. Comparison with a recording from Cameroon on Chappuis (2000) confirmed that it was given by Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*, a species not previously recorded in Benin.

Scanning the *Typha* with binoculars revealed a couple of small warbler-like birds continuously flicking their broadly fanned tails, but remaining partially hidden. They were dark olive-brown overall, with a whitish throat bordered below by blackish streaks. Their bellies were pale to yellowish white. Their bills were relatively long and fine, only slightly shorter than head length. They occasionally flew short distances within the patch of *Typha*, snapping their wings. Both their appearance and general behaviour matched the description of Little Rush Warbler (Borrow & Demey 2001).

The birds could not be easily confused, principally due to their distinctive song. European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and similar species lack the long, broad and fanned tail, and the streaking on the lower throat. Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus* and Great Swamp Warbler *A. rufescens*, both recorded in the same area, are considerably larger and bulkier with totally different vocalisations. The two cisticolas



Figure 1. The Plaine du Sô, Benin, where Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala* was discovered, 9 December 2012 (Bruno Portier)

La Plaine du Sô, Bénin, où la Bouscarle caqueteuse *Bradypterus baboecala* a été découverte, 9 décembre 2012 (Bruno Portier)

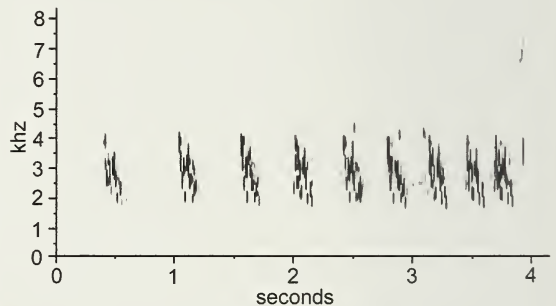


Figure 2. Sonogram of the song of Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*, Plaine du Sô, Benin, 1 December 2012 (song recorded by SM; sonogram produced by JM using Speech Analyzer 3.0.1)

Sonogramme du chant de la Bouscarle caqueteuse *Bradypterus baboecala*, Plaine du Sô, Bénin, 1er décembre 2012 (chant enregistré par SM; sonogramme produit par JM en utilisant Speech Analyzer 3.0.1)

commonly present in the Plaine du Sô, Winding Cisticola *galactotes* and Zitting Cisticola *C. juncidis*, are either smaller and lack the longish tail, or have streaky upperparts. While Little Rush Warbler is



Figure 3. Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala* fanning its tail, Plaine du Sô, Benin, 9 December 2012 (Bruno Portier)

Bouscarle caquetteuse *Bradypterus baboecala* avec la queue en éventail, Plaine du Sô, Bénin, 9 décembre 2012 (Bruno Portier)



Figure 4. Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala* singing, Plaine du Sô, Benin, 9 December 2012 (Bruno Portier)

Bouscarle caquetteuse *Bradypterus baboecala* chantant, Plaine du Sô, Bénin, 9 décembre 2012 (Bruno Portier)

usually described as secretive, we did not find this to be the case, as we were able to observe them well over longer periods and at relatively close range. In total, we noted four singing individuals at three different locations.

A week later, on 9 December, BP visited the same area and was able to make sound-recordings and take photographs (Figs. 3–5); he counted seven singing individuals at three locations. On 15 December, JM & SM undertook a more thorough search along two roads across the floodplains, from Akassato north-east towards the Sô River and south-east towards Sô-Ava, covering a linear corridor of c.6 km of suitable habitat. They counted 12 singing individuals at nine different locations. On average, a singing bird was encountered every 500 m of track. Songs came only from the taller *Typha australis* and sometimes *Cyperus papyrus* grasses, but never from the short *Paspalum vaginatum* grasslands. The birds started singing at c.05.50 hrs, when it was still dark, and sang with varying intensity throughout the morning. BP noted that they were significantly less active from 12 January 2013 onwards, with the onset of the dry season.

Records from November–December 2014 by other observers (B. Piot pers. comm., T. Helsen pers. comm.) and the relative high density of Little Rush Warblers in the Plaine du Sô indicate the presence of a healthy resident population that is not confined to the small area accessed during our surveys. This is confirmed by other records, including those of a bird heard near the main road next to a floodplain of the Ouémé River north of Goutin (06°44'30"N 02°28'45"E) on 17 December 2012, and of another singing in a *Typha* reedbed bordering the Porto-Novo Lagoon at Djérègbé (06°26'50"N 02°38'23"E) on 17 August 2014. The species probably occurs in suitable vegetation throughout the lower Ouémé–Lake Nokoué and Porto-Novo Lagoon complex.

In West Africa, Little Rush Warbler was until recently known only from Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994), where it was considered rare and very local, having been reported only at Onitsha and two northern locations, Kazaure and Kano. The last decade has produced a record for southern Togo (Selfe 2003) and several for Ghana (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2014), extending its range westwards. A possible record for Côte d'Ivoire



Figure 5. Little Rush Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*, showing blackish streaking on the lower throat, Plaine du Sô, Benin, 9 December 2012 (Bruno Portier)

Bouscarle caqueteuse *Bradypterus baboecala*, montrant les stries noirâtres sur le bas de la gorge, Plaine du Sô, Bénin, 9 décembre 2012 (Bruno Portier)

is unconfirmed (Thiollay 1985). In the absence of specimens, the race in West Africa remains unknown but is probably *B. b. msiri* (Dickinson & Christidis 2014, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2014).

The records from south-eastern Benin reported here fill a gap in the species' distribution and suggest that it should be present in suitable habitat elsewhere along the West African coast.

Acknowledgements

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